

Goose Hunting in August

Twenty years ago, a spring population index of 80,000 resident Canada geese in North Dakota might have seemed a bit optimistic. Today, the Game and Fish Department's population objective for these birds remains at 80,000. Achieving that mark is as much a challenge today as it was 20 years ago, but the strategy for reaching that number has changed dramatically.

In 1988, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's annual May waterfowl survey indicated about 18,000 resident Canada geese in North Dakota. The 2007 spring count was 362,000.

Resident or "giant" Canada geese are the largest of 11 Canada goose subspecies recognized in North America, and the only subspecies known to nest within the Great Plains, including North Dakota. At one time in the early 1900s, these birds were considered extinct.

When remnant flocks of these 10-13-pound birds were identified in the 1960s, restoration efforts began. The success of this restoration effort around the country and in North Dakota is well known. It wasn't until 1965 that the Fish and Wildlife Service estimated North Dakota had about 100 wild breeding pairs of giant Canadas.

Between 1972 and 1981, more than 6,000 hand-reared geese were released at 83 sites across the state to establish breeding populations. Starting in the early 1980s, North Dakota Game and Fish Department biologists, with assistance and support from local wildlife clubs and landowners, began an aggressive program for trapping and transplanting giant Canada geese to supplement the hand-reared release effort.

In early summer, biologists would trap goslings and some adults in areas that had sufficient numbers of these birds, and transport them to new areas where local people had requested geese. The program was based on research that indicated flightless female goslings would return to nest and raise a family in the same area where they learned to fly.

The theory worked. Game and Fish moved several thousand birds over the course of a decade and established breeding populations in every county in the state. When birds were moved to new areas, protective zones were established where hunters could not take any Canada geese. Seasons were kept

short and daily limits were restricted so the population could build.

While all this was occurring, the resident Canada goose population gradually increased to more than 20,000 in 1993, then Mother Nature stepped in with abundant rain and snow that put water back into thousands of wetlands that had been dry for years. With hundreds of thousands of acres of new breeding habitat to occupy, the resident Canada goose population took off on its own.

Excellent habitat conditions prevailed for the rest of the decade. Resident Canada geese exceeded the 80,000 population objective for the first time in 1999. The spring survey indicated a population of more than 200,000 in 2005, and more than 300,000 in 2007.

During this time of rapid goose population growth, Game and Fish stopped its transplant efforts, stopped using or putting up goose nesting structures, removed the zones where Canada goose hunting was closed, and took advantage of all the season days allowed under Fish and Wildlife Service frameworks.

In addition, in 1999 Game and Fish for the first time offered an early goose season designed to specifically target resident Canada geese. That first year the season was open in early September in southeastern North Dakota's Sargent and Richland counties only. Since then, Game and Fish has held an early Canada goose season statewide.

For a couple of years the early season ran two weeks, then it expanded to three weeks. Since 2006 it has been restricted to 15 days because too many migrant Canada geese, which start moving into the state in mid-September, were harvested during the third week.

During this September season, hunting hours are from 30 minutes before sunrise to sunset each day. The daily bag limit is five.

Starting in 2002, another program began, allowing landowners to get permits to directly kill or destroy nests of resident geese that were causing depredation problems in spring and early summer.

All these additional opportunities have generated considerable harvest and management take – more than 200,000 geese since 1999 – and yet the resident Canada goose population continued to grow.

While North Dakota can no longer run its early



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Canada goose season through the third week in September, another option is now available that adds significantly to the number of days allowed for targeting resident Canada geese. Officially called a “management take,” by the Fish and Wildlife Service, in the same manner that the spring light goose season is officially called a “conservation order,” northern states can now start hunting Canada geese as early as August 1. Previously, hunting methods could not be used to take Canada geese earlier than September 1.

While the August Canada goose season could open the first of the month, Game and Fish administrators and biologists have decided to start slowly this year to see how hunters and landowners respond to this new opportunity. As such, North Dakota’s early goose season this year will open August 15.

It’s not exactly an opportunity that many hunters have anxiously anticipated. August heat, mosquitoes and a lack of harvested crops for field hunting venues are all factors that somewhat temper hunter enthusiasm for getting started any earlier than the previous September 1 opener.

On the other hand, extending the season into August is one of the only viable options left under federal regulations for adding more hunter harvest opportunities into the giant Canada goose population management equation.

Hunters and landowners often wonder why a spring option isn’t available for Canada geese, as it is for light geese. This possibility was addressed in the final Environmental Impact Statement developed by the Fish and Wildlife Service for resident Canada goose management. An EIS was needed to allow goose harvest outside the September 1 start date for most migratory bird hunting as established in the Migratory Bird Treaty with Canada and Mexico.

The purpose of the EIS is for the Fish and Wildlife Service to “... evaluate alternative strategies to reduce, manage and control resident Canada goose populations in the continental United States and reduce related damages.” And “... to provide a regulatory mechanism that would allow states and local agencies, and other federal agencies, and groups and individuals to respond to damage complaints or damages by resident Canada geese.”

An alternative for spring hunting, however, was not included, as explained by the following statement from the EIS:

“During the spring (March–May) there are numerous temporal and geographic overlaps between the various Canada goose populations. Because the status of each population varies widely, and because any management action for resident Canada geese must be legally targeted at only resident Canada geese, we see no feasible way to consider spring time hunting or control of resident Canada geese using hunters during this time period.”

For the past couple of years, at Game and Fish advisory board meetings, administrators have encouraged public input on a potential August early Canada goose season opener. In addition to questions about hunting these birds in spring, hunters also query about extending the regular fall season.

The issue there is that North Dakota and other states in the Central Flyway are limited by Fish and Wildlife Service frameworks to 107 days for Canada goose hunting. Adding days at the end means sacrificing days early on, or closing the season for a week or more in the middle. In addition, shooting geese at the end of the season does not target birds that reside in North Dakota year-round.

Based on input from hunters desiring more late-season opportunity, Game and Fish is planning to try something new this fall in a newly created zone along the Missouri River. In this zone, seven days will be taken off in September and added to the end of the season. Any early goose hunting days added in August do not count against the 107-day federal framework maximum.

While moving the early season into August may not create a huge wave of enthusiasm, Game and Fish sees it as an additional hunting opportunity available to those who want to go. It is also a way to help landowners alleviate crop depredation problems.

Department biologists will thoroughly analyze what happens this fall, with opportunities for adjustments next year. Following the early season, the Game and Fish Department will also want to know what hunters think, **From Both Sides**.

To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.

Early Canada Goose Season Details

Missouri River Zone

Opens: August 15 **Closes:** September 7

Note: Reducing the early season by one week in September will allow Game and Fish to add one week to the regular goose season in the new Missouri River zone, which will be proposed to end January 2.

Rest of State

Opens: August 15 **Closes:** September 15

Note: Regular season will be proposed to end December 25 in rest of state.

Daily limit for both early season zones is five Canada geese, with a possession limit of 10. Hunting hours are 30 minutes before sunrise to sunset daily.